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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MP MOSBAH AL-AHDAB FEARS MARCH 14 HAS  
LOST ITS WAY

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

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11. (C/NF) During an August 17 luncheon with the Ambassador and poloff, Tripoli MP Mosbah al-Ahdab presented a bleak precis of the situation in Lebanon. Ahdab, a Sunni and March 14 charter member, described the March 14 movement as rudderless and bereft of good ideas. The government is ill-prepared to rebuild the country. Meanwhile, Iran and Hizballah are well on their way to winning over hearts and minds through a directed propaganda campaign to portray Hizballah as the only power capable of rebuilding Lebanon. Ahdab fears Hizballah is rearming and preparing to emerge in two or three months' time to directly challenge the primacy of the state in Lebanon. Clearly dismayed, but not willing to concede just yet, Ahdab said the GOL needs to develop a step-by-step plan to work in concert with the international community to strengthen the central government so that it can challenge Hizballah head-on and dismantle the "state within a state." Ahdab said the first step should be the removal of President Emile Lahoud, and suggested that someone should examine the President's suspected financial improprieties. Short on clear ideas for moving ahead, Ahdab promised to brainstorm and get back to the Ambassador. END SUMMARY.

"THERE IS NO TEAM"  
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12. (C) One of the original March 14 members (and the only Sunni MP who dared defy Syria's wishes and vote against Emile Lahoud's extension), Ahdab said he has grown frustrated with the laissez-faire attitude of the group, particularly Saad Hariri (whom he described as "my friend" enough to suggest doubt in the listeners' ears). Complaining that the typical Saad response to any problem is a casual "don't worry," Ahdab believes that Hariri is surrounded by yes-men who convince him that he is managing everything perfectly, to such an extent that Saad apparently believes he can rally two million people to his cause just by snapping his fingers. Snickering about the ubiquitous images of Saad hobnobbing with global leaders under the media slogan "The Diplomatic Resistance," Ahdab said that Saad's public relations campaign is ill-conceived, particularly by the plastering of his father's picture everywhere, and added that "Saad needs a course in diction." (Note: Saad's Qureitem mansion is a veritable

Rafiq Hariri photo exhibit, while the Hariri-controlled Future TV has an ever-present ticker, now in the high 500s, counting the days since Hariri's assassination. End Note.) Saad needs to stop living in the past, argued Ahdab, and start thinking about how to fix Lebanon. "'Don't worry'," parroted Ahdab, "I've had a year and a half of him saying 'don't worry'. We need ideas now."

13. (C) Sounding discouraged, Ahdab gave an account of the August 16 meeting of the March 14 group, describing an increasingly factionalized atmosphere. At one point, Saad interrupted a conversation Ahdab was having with someone and took that person aside for a private chat with Marwan Hamadeh, which Ahdab didn't appreciate at all. "There's no transparency, even in March 14." Ahdab described Lebanese Forces leader Samir Ja'ja' as "scared," and that some Maronites were opposed to sending the army into the south without first confronting Hizballah over disarmament. MP Fares Souaid even suggested that the Maronites should "demarcate" themselves from the rest of March 14 in order to more strenuously oppose Nasrallah. Ahdab said that the meeting decided nothing, not even a coordinated media strategy or "talking points" for tackling the various issues. (Note: Thus, in his 8/17 press conference, Walid Joumblatt strenuously objected to Hizballah's unilateral decision to kidnap the Israeli soldiers, whereas Saad, in his speech only one hour beforehand, hailed the "heroic resistance." End Note.) "There is no team," lamented Ahdab, "We just take pictures together." Ahdab liked the Ambassador's idea that the March 14 group develop some sort of coordinating body, such as a secretariat, that could send out daily messages for everyone to reinforce publicly.

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14. (C) Ahdab said the inaction stretches to the Cabinet and Council of Ministers. Though the March 14 members have held a controlling share in those two bodies for the past year, they have accomplished nothing. Complaining that there was "no communication or planning," Ahdab said that "decisions aren't made in the Government of Lebanon." Ahdab argued that the Lebanese government needs to be front and center in leading the reconstruction charge and reclaim the initiative from Hizballah, with ministers visiting the South and plans laid out for rebuilding. Yet there is as yet no real assessment of the damage in the South and no clear idea about the social services and infrastructure situation.

15. (C) Meanwhile, a "huge team" is preparing itself in Tehran and in "the caves" of southern Lebanon to expand the Hizballah's support and rebuild its militant infrastructure. Hassan Nasrallah is handing out \$10,000 a family for destroyed homes, buying a whole new generation of followers, and claiming that Iranian money is "clean money." When the Ambassador asked why Ahdab didn't respond to this Hizballah claim about the money, Ahdab said he didn't feel confident he would receive support from March 14, claiming there are "jealousies" in the group. He'd stuck his neck out before, he said, and "they tried to get rid of me."

WHICH IS THE STATE WITHIN A STATE?  
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16. (C) Ahdab said that Hizballah plans to build itself up so that it is bigger than the state and in "two or three months" will be able to openly challenge the Lebanese state. "Then the government will be the state within a state, within the state of Hizballah." Scoffing at the strategy, espoused by Saad, that merely by embracing the Hizballahis into the government -- what he derisively calls the "marhaba shabab" approach -- you will get them to lay down their weapons. He absolutely agreed with the Ambassador's point that Hizballah will never become a normal Lebanese political party on its own volition.

17. (C) Ahdab wants a plan in place to build up the state,

supported by the international community, so that it can face up to the Hizballah challenge and begin, gradually, to dismantle the militant infrastructure. Supportive of the job PM Siniora is doing, he nevertheless feels that Siniora does not have the necessary support structure in place to take action. (Comment: Our perception is that Siniora is a micro-manager, even getting into the nitty-gritty details of fuel shipments during the crisis, and needs to delegate more.

Lebanon is lucky to have Siniora at this time, but Siniora needs to be less of a control freak. End Comment.) The LAF deployment to the South is a critical first step in this, and the government responsiveness in reconstruction will be key in rallying people to the GOL. Over time, the government should also begin replacing the upper echelons of the LAF with more March 14-sympathetic figures. "There are Sunnis and Christians now in the LAF who are more Hizballahi than Hizballah itself." The Ambassador stressed that GOL control over all points of entry would contribute to the perception of a strengthened state and combat arms smuggling, allowing the LAF, with new equipment and training, to become relatively stronger.

"FIRST THING'S FIRST --  
GET RID OF LAHOUD"

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18. (C/NF) Ahdab stressed that to have a more assertive state, President Lahoud must first be removed from office. Not certain that Speaker Berri will be willing to support a constitutional removal, Ahdab suggested -- as have others such as Nayla Mouawad and Amin Gemayel -- that Lahoud's rumoured financial improprieties be examined more closely. If something were found linking him to the Bank al-Medina scandal or his son Emile to the oil-for-food morass, Ahdab argued, then he might more easily be dislodged from Baabda Palace. When the Ambassador asked why the March 14 group has not vigorously pursued exposing the Bank al-Medina scandal, Ahdab said that he suspects some March 14 members could be implicated. "But," he added, "we may have to make

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some sacrifices in order to get Lahoud out." The Ambassador reminded Ahdab that the Lebanese Prosecutor-General, Said Mirza (linked to the Hariris), has many documents related to the Bank al-Medina scandal.

COMMENT

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19. (C) Still only speaking in generalities, Ahdab promised the Ambassador to come up with some ideas before he is due to meet with the Ambassador for dinner on August 22. We will see what he can dig up about Bank al-Medina and oil-for-food.

On the one hand, removing Lahoud now, particularly without Berri's support, would throw the political situation in Lebanon into disarray for a month or two, diverting attention from the important rebuilding effort, but on the other hand, it would remove one of the main obstacles to March 14 realizing some of its objectives, such as changing the LAF leadership. If Lahoud can be ousted, on balance, it would be positive and contribute to the weakening of Hizballah.

10. (C) Ahdab also seemed genuinely miffed by the cliqueishness developing within the March 14 group, and we detected a certain amount of wounded pride, since he considers himself a founding member. We would be especially concerned by a possible Maronite defection from the ranks of March 14. In the coming days, we will assess the potential for this and will keep people focused on getting a firm reconstruction plan in place as soon as possible to combat the perception that Hizballah is in control of the effort. End Comment.

FELTMAN